

No More Shallow Relationships: Fostering an Atmosphere of Intentional Authenticity

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For The Small Group Exchange

My Story

It was a normal Wednesday night for our small group. We had finally settled into our seats after the requisite 30 minutes of catching up and conversing. The topic at hand: what we should do for our next group study?

While people began naming off recent best sellers and classic works of the faith, I looked around the room, somewhat bewildered. Here I was in a group that I'd been a part of for 9 months and I didn't feel like I knew anyone any better than I had when we started.

How does something like that happen? We were trying to have an honest and open community. We weren't consciously trying to put up walls. And while we may have all been a little bit friendlier than we were 9 months before, the fact was, our relationships hadn't gone any deeper.

I was convicted in that moment and spoke before thinking. "What if we meet for several weeks and just discuss the deeper things about our lives?" Oddly enough, everyone was on board with the idea and we spent subsequent weeks engaging with one another on topics like: our personal relationship with God, our relationships with our spouse and family, and our own personal place in the mission of God.

Intentionality

How do people spend 9 months together meeting regularly and not going deeper? I think it's because we don't know how. It's so easy to ask those basic questions:

- How was your day?
- How's work?
- What are you doing this weekend?

These are great starter questions, but we all live such fragmented lives that we rarely take the time to move past these questions.

Knowing that we are unaccustomed to going deeper in conversation, each of us must make an intentional decision and commitment to do so. That is not to say that we should begin every conversation with a deeply personal question, as that may be inappropriate. Rather, we must make an intentional decision to go deeper if the opportunity presents itself.

Authenticity

I don't believe that it would be out of line to say that people do want to go beyond the questions posed above. In fact, authors Medefind and Lokkesmoe observe, "The truth is, at the first whiff of something real, people come running."¹

People crave deeply real relationships. Sometimes it is obvious, especially to someone who has recently lost a relationship where that was the norm. For others, it may just be an unspoken yearning of the heart; a need to connect.

God designed us to live in community with one another. We can see this illustrated throughout Scripture—from Genesis 2 all the way through the New Testament Epistles. I hardly believe that He would have designed us this way so that we can discuss sports scores and television trivia.

Bringing it to Life

What really sparked my imagination to work through this process with my group was the realization that we all have something in common, whether we realize it or not (and I'd argue many times we don't). In the same manner, we all have something to offer one another. But we'll never find it until we share with each other from the deep reality of who we are.

4 Keys to Intentional Authenticity

- Be There Consistently – "There" could be anywhere in the context of the relationship, in this case it would be small group. If you are developing relationships at Starbucks or at the gym, be *there* consistently.
- Be Aware – In our attempts to be authentic, it is easy to just spew all of our personal baggage onto those around us. We must be cognizant of the environment that we are in and what would be appropriate in that environment.
- Be Open – If you want those around you to feel free to share the deeply personal things of life, there is rarely any better way than simply going first. When you break the ice, chances are people will be willing to jump in with you.
- Be Real – Erwin McManus states that, "Authenticity without integrity is lethal."² This means that what we share must be honest, but at the same time respectful. Respectful with what we say and respectful of what we hear. Some groups even have the motto of "what is shared in group stays in group."

The Payoff

Relationships don't come easy. They must be pursued and fought for. It's a hard-won battle, but the rewards are priceless.

¹ Lokkesmoe, Eric and Jedd Medefind. *The Revolutionary Communicator: Seven Principles Jesus Used to Impact, Connect and Lead*. Lake Mary: Relevant Books, 2004. 74.

² McManus, Erwin. *Uprising: A Revolution of the Soul*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003. 67.

Asking each other deep questions is not a magic pill for authenticity. It can be a doorway, though. A means by which we can find new topics with which to engage each other.

God made each of us unique and placed us in contact with one another in a way that should proclaim His glory through our differences. If we want to see our groups the way that God sees them, we must fight the pull of shallow relationships and wade into the depths of one another's lives. Only then will we live as the community Christ created us to be.